

Are you crazy?

“I saw the submariners, the way they stood aloof and silent, watching their pig boat with loving eyes. They are alone in the Navy. I admired the PT boat boys. And I often wondered how the aviators had the courage to go out day after day and I forgave their boasting. But the submariners! In the entire fleet they stand apart!”

James Michener - *Tales of the South Pacific*

Hanging in my office is a WWII recruiting poster of a sailor, white hat cocked back and an understandable grin on his face with a beautiful ruby lipped brunette reminiscent of a 1940s movie star, in his arms. Back then the dolphins were embroidered on the lower right sleeve which cannot be seen in the poster, so what distinguishes him as a submariner is the war patrol pin the gorgeous brunette is fondling admiringly. The artist's tongue was, no doubt, firmly touching the inside of his cheek. Neither I nor any shipmate ever got within a heevie throw of anyone looking like her. Across the bottom it says, “He volunteered for submarine service.” The implication seems to be that while you had about a one in four chance of dying with all your shipmates, you'd at least do well with the ladies if you got back! I can't help smiling every time I look at it.

Surely there are as many stories about why and under what circumstances submariners volunteered for sub duty as there are members of the “silent service” itself. Everyone has one and most of them are amusing and my guess is that those stories from diesel boat sailors do not differ much from those of nuclear power sailors. All submariners from the very beginning have been volunteers.

In my bond trading business we have our own language. When one of us wishes to reveal something personal or some business secret to another we say, “I'm going to lift my skirts a little.” Well, here goes.

A year or so ago Barbara, my wife of 42 years, and I had an argument which she attributed to the fact that I was depressed. My response was, “Of course I'm a little depressed. Hell, I'm Irish for God's sake!” So, to end the argument, I extended the olive branch and agreed to go to a lady psychiatrist friend of hers to, presumably, be declared certifiably sane. Or at least that was my hope. I sat in this lady's office facing her in a straight backed chair and I began to smile and I said, “You know doctor, the last time I saw a psychiatrist was when I volunteered for submarine duty. You see the Navy immediately sent anyone who volunteered for subs to the base hospital shrink. Evidentially the Navy assumed you had to be crazy to volunteer for such duty. We all thought the practice was very funny. In fact it is one of the great inside jokes among submariners.” Anyway, this doctor was fascinated with why we liked living on subs and who volunteered for this stuff and we spent the rest of the hour discussing nothing else. I was finally let out with her assurance that I was not crazy, a fact which I immediately cell-phoned Barbara from the parking lot.

Ron Gorance from San Diego (*Razorback, Bashaw, Swordfish, Tang, and Sabalo*) submitted a funny story. Here is the beginning of it:

The U.S. Military came up in the discussion somehow, and I mumbled something about my personal history. 'Submarines? You were on submarines?' He squinted and looked directly into my eyes, pausing like he was trying to plumb the soul of a Martian, and stumbled on, 'Don't you get . . . ah, y'know, ah . . . takes guts, . . . I could never do that.'

Did he say nuts, or guts? Either way, my habitual response was, 'It's not so bad. You get used to it. Yeah, claustrophobia could be a problem.'

This Deja vu conversation happens at Christmas parties and during short airplane flights - anywhere abbreviated autobiographies are expected. It's eventually been part of every one of my permanent relationships. Afterward, I always think, 'I wish I'd said . . . ,' but then I shrug, 'They could never understand.'

The problem is, he or she, seconds ago, was trading polite grins with an apparently-normal human being; suddenly, it dawns: Normal humans do not sink themselves in a sewer pipe and then materialize on a far shore grinning because it came back to the surface. It is quite natural to wonder whether insanity is a main prerequisite for, or the result of, becoming a submariner.

Further on in his submission he added;

Selection of "volunteers" begins with psychological testing: claustrophobia tests, personality tests, academic tests, intelligence tests, Rorschach tests, interviews, consultations and interrogations. They asked why I had a tattoo.

'Because I had eight hours of freedom from boot camp, four dollars, and two beers.' Right answer! Most of us who made it through screening agreed that they had rejected everyone who had passed, and kept the nuts.

Physical examinations were intended to eliminate candidates over six-foot-four or two-hundred pounds; they could not have flat feet, and needed 20-20 vision. I memorized the eye chart when the guy in front of me read it aloud; we both missed the same two letters on the bottom line and we both passed. I leave flat-footed footprints like a duck's, and I've known many giants riding the boats. As with the headshrinkers' psychological criteria, failing wasn't necessarily failing. The physical was more like the final exam of the psychological testing: those who managed to show innovation and resourcefulness were passed on to sub school. From the late thirties through the eighties, a few men slipped through who were exactly what the silent service needed. I hope things have not changed.

I was looking through my copy of my Service Record recently to determine when I got qualified (6 June 1959), when I came across the form I signed volunteering me for Submarine Duty. I had completely forgotten we had to actually sign a form. It is remarkable for its language.

"In accordance with Art, C-7404 Bupers Manuel, subject's (me) training is not considered completed upon graduation from U.S. Naval Submarine School. Therefore, he is ineligible for transfer from Submarine Duty until he becomes "Qualified in Submarines" or for a period of twelve months from the date of first reporting to an active duty submarine, whichever is earlier. However, should he be declared environmentally unadaptable for submarine duty, the foregoing restriction will not apply."

I was under the impression that such obfuscatory language was invented much later than 1959!

In the first interview I asked Chuck Grojean why he volunteered.

CG: "Oh, I thought about it when I was a plebe with the Naval Academy in 1942. I became acquainted with submarines shortly after entering the Naval Academy, and I like the idea of a small command, I like the idea of attaining a command earlier than I would have in the surface fleet, and I really preferred it to flying because I wanted a significant command, other than just to command my own airplane.

But you know, Dan, I really believe that the idea of a ship being submerged under the water with a small group of men has got a greater appeal, probably, than say the technical aspect. The technical aspects of nuclear power, of course, have some appeal, but I believe that it's far overshadowed by the -- a real naval officer will want a command, he wants the camaraderie, and he likes the idea of the excitement of being in a submerged vehicle, whether it's diesels or nuclear.

DG: So when did you get out of submarine school, probably in '46, '47?

CG: Well, when I graduated from the Naval Academy, my eyes wouldn't permit me to go into submarines. They wouldn't take me. So I did three years in destroyers and then I honswaggled my way into submarines.

Here was a highly successful submarine warrior and he wanted sub duty so badly that he had to "honswaggle" his way in.

I asked Dave Oliver the same question and he had a completely different and serendipitous response.

"I volunteered for submarine duty because it paid hazardous duty pay, which at the time was equal to half of a young officer's base pay. At the time, you had to walk about a thousand yards from your room down to the Battalion office to indicate your selection, and I intended to be a Marine when I left my room at the Naval Academy. I was walking along with my company officer, who was a lieutenant commander -- which is a very senior rank, and the holder a "god-like" figure when you're a midshipman. The company officer, who was a destroyer officer, said, you don't want to be a Marine. You don't want to be doing pushups when you're 50. And I said, "You're right, okay, I'll go into destroyers." And he said, "No, I think this nuclear power thing is going to work, and they pay you more money." And I said, "Okay." And I signed the sheet that said 'Nuclear Power Volunteer.'"

Jim Watkins was my XO on Barbero. I of course asked him the same question about why he volunteered. Remember this is from a man who became Chief of Naval Operations (CNO)!

"I'd been aboard a submarine on a midshipman cruise when I was in the Naval Academy, and it was the worst thing I've ever experienced because we lost air conditioning and we slept in each other's sweat on bunks -- leather bunks -- for about two or three days. And I said, I'll never get into submarines. Forget it. Of course, that was on one of the old boats. And later when I was on the destroyer U.S.S. *Fechtelor*, right out of the Naval Academy, after I was there two years a classmate of mine who was in the First Lieutenant's Department, as I was. I was back on the fantail one day and he was

back on the fantail of his destroyer next door. We were getting underway in a nest of destroyers, backing out of San Diego, heading for the Far East for the Korean War. So he yelled over to me, "Watkins, you sucker, I'm getting out of this Mickey Mouse outfit. I'm going to submarine school in January." So I said, 'You sonofabitch, I'm going to apply for submarines today', so I did. I went up to the office; got a first class yeoman that was a good friend of mine. I said, "Get me an application. I want to go to submarine school as fast as I can go, see if I can beat out my classmate over there." And, sure enough, I got orders and he was deferred for six months. So I went before he did to submarine school. So my motivation was a little bit different than many others.

Pat Hannifin further advanced my theory that every one of us has a different story.

PH: At the Naval Academy, and when I was a first classman the system of assigning you to a service within the Navy was a lottery system. You drew numbers. There were 800 and some in my class graduated. I drew a number 12.

This was the Class of '45, graduating in June of '44. Anyway, so I figured on a submarine, a smaller ship, you wouldn't get lost as an Ensign on a big ship. You'd be given some responsibility early, and on a big ship, a carrier or a battleship or a cruiser, you're just another ensign. And it turned out that's exactly what happened. So I volunteered. Never been on a submarine before. Came from the horse cavalry in New Mexico [laughter]. And -- literally, New Mexico Military Institute. Then to the Naval Academy, and hadn't even seen salt water.

DG: Well, neither did Nimitz.

PH: No, that's right. He came out of Fredericksburg, Texas. This was 1944. The war was on, and that was the other reason I wanted to go into submarines. Because I wanted to be in a submarine in wartime.

Right out of the Naval Academy, they sent all of us through aviation indoctrination at Jacksonville. Left there, got married in Roswell, went to San Diego, and was assigned to an "S" boat here in San Diego. "S" boats were built between 1917 and 1924. Leaked like hell at 150 feet - test depth, 200 feet, and -- well, that was when they were new. [Laughter] And so I wasn't quite sure that I'd made the right decision, but this was before submarine school because submarine school didn't start till September. There were about 125 of our class who went directly into submarines.

Went to submarine school after the "S" boat, and it was from September till December, came out to the Pacific, made three war patrols on the USS *Balao* SS-285. The *Balao*, which is the boat that they have the sail and all that at the Washington Naval Yard. 285 was the first thick-skin boat. First of a class. I think we may have had a test depth of maybe three or four hundred feet, something like that. But any rate, it was thick-skin. First patrol, up in the Yellow Sea, deepest water 225 feet. Got depth-charged the hell out of us, the boat's 312 feet long, and we had 225 feet of water, and so it was also my first patrol, so another time when I thought, 'I'm not quite sure I'm in the right service.' [Laughs] Anyway, that was my first wartime experience.

Here is Chuck Griffith's unique response... 'for the food!'

"Really, what made me do it was listening to these COs that came back (from the Pacific War) to talk to the midshipmen. They gave lectures to the midshipmen en route to

new construction. And quite a few of the skippers were moving around because we were building submarines very fast then and in large numbers, and they were moving the guys off the old boats and on to new ones. And I had the chance to hear a couple of those talks, and was very much impressed with them. The fact that they were the least regulation, that they were extremely informal, that they worked hard when they had to and they played hard when they had a chance to play. And they ate better than anybody in the Navy. Well, those three things to me were sellers. I just thought, you know, this is the way to go, and so I put in for submarines and at that time they took about 100 of my classmates -- right into submarines from graduation. We were the last class to do that in those days, and the next class behind us had to go to sea for two years before they could put in for submarines. So we ended up being the junior guys onboard for a long time because they didn't crank out any people to relieve us for a couple of years. So we had a large group that went right to submarine training and graduated from submarine training at the end of '45 and went to our first submarines. But that's what made me go.

DG: I've asked everybody that same question, and it's interesting to hear the responses. You're the first one who said the food was better. It really was. No question. We had great food.

CG: That was a seller. That was a big one. Well, the other one I liked was the informality, and I liked the idea of working hard because I believe in working hard, too, when there's work to do. But I also like to have fun, and those all sounded like real winners to me.

Bob Gautier's story "...finally, after three years I finally got in."

BG: Well, when I first got out of the Naval Academy, I actually put in for flying because my number was too low to get into submarines. In other words, we knew that one out of four would go to submarines, but my number was about five hundred and something. So I decided I'd go into aviation, which I really didn't want to do. And then finally, after three years, I finally got in submarines.

DG: So you were a black shoe, (on surface ships)?

BG: A destroyer to start with and then a DE, the *Fieberling*, and then I got in submarines. I went to sub school in '48, graduated in '48 and went to Pearl and went to the *Tilefish*. Which is now long gone, but that was the oldest submarine in the Pacific at the time. Fleet boat, yeah, 307. And so then I stayed in Pearl and got on the *Tang*, but before going to sub school I went to the *Halfbeak*, and my first skipper was Gene Flucky (famous submarine CO during WWII).

And he said, You know how to dive a submarine? I said, No. He said, You get up there; when I say dive the boat, you say, See that button over there? He said, Push that button. And I said, Okay, that sounds reasonable enough. But during the war, when the diving alarm went, the vents opened. They didn't wait till the second blast. And so I was up there and I pushed that button the first Aooga, and then that water came in.

DG: You heard the vents!

BG: The next one was a short Aooga, and I was down that hatch. But that was my first dive on a submarine, with Gene Flucky, and I spent two months doing that before going to sub school.

DG: Since you were on destroyers, could you describe any differences in the esprit or élan of the submarine crews versus the destroyers?

BG: Yep, I got on -- I guess it was the *Halfbeak*. We dove and the Main Induction was left open. We got a lot of water, and the chief engineer told Gene Flucky, he said, 'We got some water in the engine room,' and Flucky says, 'Okay, pump it out'. And I thought, 'By God, this was for me!'. [Laughter] Because these guys, you know, they didn't make a big to-do about this thing.

DG: A stuck open Main Induction!?

BG: He was smart, though. I mean, he was good. He was good and I was fortunate to serve with him, and so I've got all of his books - *Thunder Below*. But then I got out of sub school and I went to the *Tilefish* with Ben Jarvis. I think he made 13 or 14 patrols. He was a big guy. He was about 6-6; he had a 54-inch chest, and I'd come down the hatch and he'd stand right behind me at the dive station and I'd do something wrong, and he'd take that fist, just about a six-inch punch, you know? I'd buckle. He'd say, 'You didn't do that right.' But he was a good guy. I mean, these guys, I was fortunate to go to sea with them. They were real good skippers - they were good ones.

Don Walsh's decision to volunteer was a three cushion pool shot. He wanted to fly but his eyesight stopped that, then it was UDT but his boss talked him out of it. He is further proof of my position that there are as many stories about volunteering for submarines as there have been submariners.

DW: I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 30's and 40's. From as far back as I can remember I was an airplane nut. While in high school I was in the Civil Air Patrol and the Air Scouts. When barely old enough I enlisted in the Naval Air Reserve joining VA-62A at NAS Oakland. I became an aircrewman on Avenger torpedo bombers. All our pilots had seen action in WWII and the squadron was a pretty relaxed military organization. Really exciting for a high school kid who barely had a drivers license. All of this fed an intense desire to become a career naval aviator. Annapolis seemed to be the way to do and this and I got an appointment through the Naval Reserve.

When I graduated with the Class of 1954, my dream ended. My eyes were no longer good enough to pass the flight physical. It was a real blow; flying was the only thing I had wanted to do in my life. I had no "plan B"...

In those days, we all had to serve two years in the fleet before going into the specialized branches of the Navy: aviation or submarines. The idea was for the new officer to get needed seagoing experience and become qualified as a watchstander.

My first ship was the Long Beach based *Mathews* (AKA-96) a combat cargo ship in the Amphibious Forces Pacific Fleet. It was good duty and I learned a lot of practical seamanship. We spent a lot of time at sea and the learning curve was steep. Within a year I was the navigator.

Despite great duty for a new naval officer, I knew this is not where I wanted to spend too much of my Navy career. While in Amphibious School at Coronado I had seen the UDT people training around the base. Hoisting a few beers with some of them at the O Club, I learned a bit about what they did. Clearly this was an elite small unit organization. That appealed to me. Also I had started sport diving at this time and thought it would be great to do diving as part of my 'day job'.

After I had been aboard Mathews for about a year, I talked with my captain, Vincent Meola, about volunteering for UDT. He was a real mentor, seeing that I got thoroughly trained as a ship handler and department head. I respected his views and when he strongly discouraged me from asking for UDT training, I gave up on it. He was right. At that time it was not the career path that special warfare is today.

While we were deployed to WESTPAC in '56 I had the opportunity to visit a guy from the class of '52 who had command of a minesweeper at Yokosuka. He was barely a lieutenant but was captain of his own ship. That really appealed to me but I was not sure how far that career path would go. The Korean War was over and it seemed the need for this type of ship was decreasing.

As for submarines, while at the Academy I cannot recall ever having much information or 'recruiting' pressure about this part of the Navy. This was not the case with naval aviation, Marines or the Air Force (West Point and Annapolis furnished officers to the USAF in the years before their academy was up and running). We even had something called "Aviation Summer" about half way through our four years. The "silent service" was just that. And if a submarine visited Annapolis during my four years, I don't remember it. For me it was an unknown part of the Navy. Sure I was aware of their operational history during WWII but that had ended nearly 10 years before.

Now about half way through my deployment on Mathews I had given up on UDT and the Mine Force. Navy air was not possible and that left the Submarine Service. I volunteered and was accepted for the submarine school class that started in the summer of 1956. I had never even been inside a sub and knew little about what this new life would be like. It was a small-unit, elite organization and that was good enough at this point in my career. Fortuitously, I had backed into what was to become the greatest experience of my seagoing life.

Finally, I am going to give my reason for volunteering for submarine duty. It was mostly what I did not want. I did not want to be ordinary – some black gang swabby out in the fleet – I wanted to be something special like my big brothers. My first choice was UDT (Underwater Demolition Team). However, when I was told that I would have to extend my enlistment by several years, I chose submarines. My room mate at NAPS (Naval Academy Prep School) was a submariner I'll never forget – Third Class Electrician named Jim Stewart. Because of his regaling me with his many colorful sea stories about submarine duty, that was my choice. It was one of the best decisions of my life.